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Cultural variability in young children's folk intuitions of free will

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Abstract: A notion of free will requires an understanding that an agent who performed a particular action could have acted otherwise. Little is known about how young children reason about free will, and if this reasoning is affected by the surrounding cultural context. In this study, U.S. and Chinese 4- and 6-year-olds were asked if people could choose to inhibit or act against their desires. U.S. children attributed more choice to people than Chinese children for the inhibition question type but not the action question type. There was a significant age by ethnicity interaction, with ethnicity differences significant at age 6, but not at age 4. Children from both cultures did attribute more choice to other people than they did to themselves. These results suggest that folk intuitions of free will undergo change in early childhood and that this change is, at least in part, influenced by culturally variable factors.